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ABSTRACT

Films used as a force in creating public awareness of local environmental problems were discussed in this occasional paper. Teenagers active in an environmental studies summer program at Gill School, Bernardsville, New Jersey, realized that films effectively informed fellow citizens of such problems. They produced 8mm films portraying pollution within the home, soil erosion, river pollution, and the need for open space preservation. This paper presented suggestions to help communities solve communications problems on environmental matters. Appendix 1 listed film equipment and appendix 2 basic steps for producing good film. (FF)

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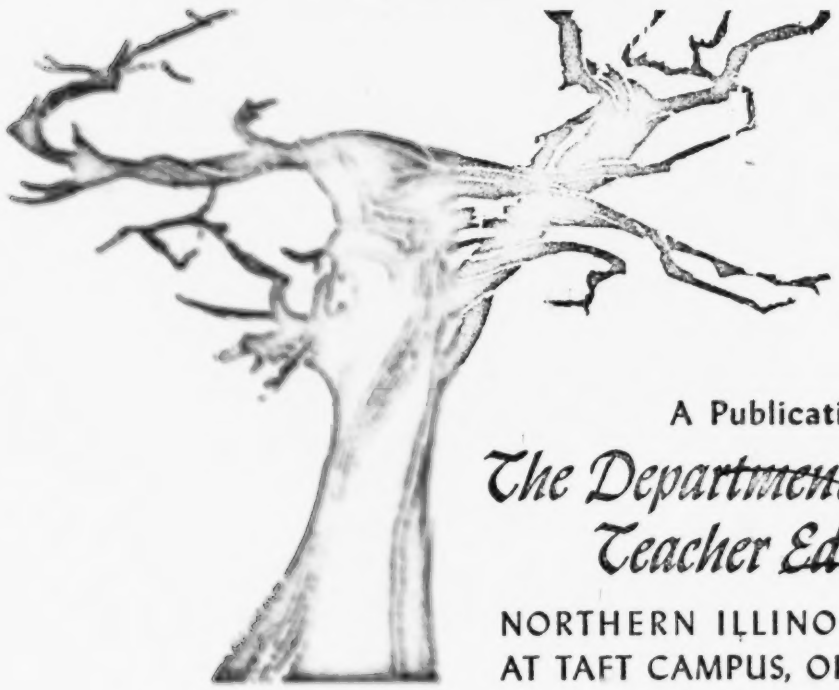
TAFT CAMPUS OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. VI

TEENS MAKE THE ENVIRONMENTAL SCENE

Robert and Sonia Vogl



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TEENS MAKE THE ENVIRONMENTAL SCENE

Producing an environmental film is a powerful force in creating public awareness of local problems. Teens active in a summer program of environmental studies at the Gill School in Bernardsville, New Jersey, quickly realized that films effectively inform fellow citizens of such problems. They produced 8 mm films portraying pollution within the home, soil erosion, river pollution, and the need for open space preservation.

Films can help your community solve some communications problems, too. Here are our suggestions for such an effort.

The first step is to purchase equipment. We found that automatic focusing cameras are the best suited to general use. The less adjustments which must be made manually, the less chance for error. Although the initial expense may seem high, with the exception of film and a few minor items, the same amount of equipment is needed to make one movie or one hundred.

Once you have your equipment, at least three weeks before you plan to film, test everything. This step is especially crucial if filming is limited. We had two weeks to plan and complete a finished product, and found after four days that the students were so fascinated by a zoom feature on one of the cameras that they used it exclusively. The result was something like being in a swing. Imagine the wasted time and expense if you discover after a week of filming that the camera leaks light or is too complex to handle or that the splicer is the wrong size!

Get a feel for the camera. Discover some of the technical problems which must be met. How does sunlight affect bright surfaces when photographed? How does the zoom lens work if there is one? What settings should be used in different light conditions? How close can the camera get to the subject and still get a focused picture? Try to answer questions such as these.

For each filming project you'll need a full idea of what will constitute the movie. Of course, students can expand their thinking by reading about environmental concerns and viewing existing environmental movies.

Discussions with local environmentalists will provide many ideas of what major concepts can be presented. Citizens active in local environmental concerns and professionals employed by business and government can provide many leads.

After they expand their thinking, it's important for the film makers to narrow their focus down to five or six specific concepts which they think are important supporting concepts:

1. The need for open space;
2. What space within the community offered the best potential
3. How people could make use of the space;
4. What needed to be done to improve the existing space;
5. How citizens could work toward securing the open space.

The next step is to decide what actions would best get your idea across. You should also choose the setting for the film's action.

There's no set rule for choosing either the action or the setting. The topic itself should help you to decide. Some films give the impression that they were the result of a happy accident, but if they're really good, chances are that they're the result of some good planning. This planning can take several forms.

One of our groups was interested in showing a natural area as it was in order to convince the public to preserve it. The setting, naturally, was the natural area. Taking movies there required travel time which had to be planned for.

Another group decided to show the effects of poor land use and management with the resulting erosion and silt. So they had to look for a location which showed good soil conservation practices and another which showed poor practices. In this case, the only part of the setting, which they couldn't plan for was a heavy rainfall, which, luckily, happened naturally in time for filming. Again, this is as good a reason as any to allow for excess time.

Have some idea of the sequence in which you'll want the shots to appear in the final copy. For example, if you intend to show how a river begins as a pure stream and gradually becomes polluted, take the first shots of the upstream section and finish with shots of the lower portion. Such planning will minimize the need for excessive cuts and splicing.

Remember, the entire film should be only five or six minutes long. Young people run out of ideas after that and audiences run out of patiences with amateurism after that amount of time, too. A thirty-minute amateur film seems to run forever.

Assign each group member a specific job. This not only gives each of them a feeling of personal involvement, it also helps to get the job done smoothly. Different tasks must be done at different times, so plan other activities for those who aren't involved on any particular day.

A good job can be done with as few as four people. As many as seven or eight can be involved, but more take careful planning in order for each to have a real task. You'll need a photographer, a script writer, editor and splicer, narrator, projector operator, tape recorder operator, musicians, and actors. The entire group should work together to pool ideas.

Next comes the script writing. Since you already have the concepts, this part of the project involves putting them to words. The one or two students in charge of this portion of the project should have a good command of the language, and be able to state ideas clearly and concisely.

The script should be written on a paper which has been divided in half lengthwise. The narration should be on the left side of the page and the corresponding picture indicated on the right side. Leave plenty of room for notes, because there will probably be several revisions.

We came across two problems in script writing. First, a writer tends to have a proprietary attitude toward his work. He may resist strongly any suggested revisions. If this happens, he'll have to be reminded that this is a group project.

The second problem is that many young people tend to want to tell about the details of the picture rather than the concept which it is meant to illustrate. Rather than show an inadequately operating sewage treatment plant, for example, and state that it should be properly maintained in order to function properly, they may tend to describe in detail all of the problems of that one particular plant.

Next comes the actual filming. Shoot with a long range goal in mind. Plan to develop your own film library. You may find that left over shots from this year's film are just what you need to fill in a blank in next yearb. We found the film library concept to be very helpful.

One of our groups had to travel some distance from the school in order to take pictures of a particular location. When assembling the film, they discovered that some shots were poorly taken and that they needed a few others which they had neglected to take. Looking through the previous year's extra films, they found just what they needed and went on to finish their project.

Take a few extra shots with this idea in mind. Even bad shots can be saved and used as illustrations of incorrect techniques.

We found that 5 to 10 seconds is the best length of time for any single shot. Shorter shots can be used only for flashes (a useful technique) and longer ones tend to drag on. Sometimes, though, you might need a slightly longer shot if you have specific facts to state. One of our films had a sequence on excess packaging. In order to explain the differences in price between six small cans of juice and one large can, we needed a 30 second shot of them.

Most cameras have instructions which tell what f-stop to use in certain lighting conditions. But if you are not sure what the light conditions are (is it sunny bright or sunny not bright?) take the first shot at what seems to be the best exposure, then stop down for the second and up for the third.

Most films require acting. Use students for the roles. Not only do they enjoy seeing themselves on the screen, it's a good experience for them.

All of our class films have student actors. In some cases, they were just people who were there -- playing games in a park which they wanted saved, or walking along looking at the effects of erosion.

In one film, though, the student played major roles. We needed someone to demonstrate correct and incorrect practices for a film on pollution within the home. The group felt that the audience would identify with characters who consistently did the right thing and recognize those who did not. So four of the students volunteered to play the roles of the environmentally aware couple and the environmentally unaware couple. We asked neighbor children to play the roles of their children.

If you need extras, ask bystanders if you can photograph their activities. They're usally cooperative. But don't ever photograph anyone without his permission.

You may need some props, too. You can't expect to happen across everything you'll need to tell your story, during the time you allowed for shooting. The heavy rain which added drama to the silt and erosion movie was a happy accident.

So you may find it necessary to stage some shots. We needed a shot of dead fish to dramatize the effects of silt on wildlife. If we had waited long enough, we'd have come across some eventually. But we had a time schedule to meet. So we bought two dead fish, placed them in a muddy pond, and photographed them.

A question arises here. At what point does distortion enter in? If this picture is used simply to illustrate a concept - in this case, pollution kills fish - it can't be considered a distortion. The concept is generally accepted as true, and the picture adds drama. But if the staged shot is meant to illustrate a specific statement (we found this fish in the local river below Industry X's outfall) then it's a distortion. In a way, those dead fish could be considered actors.

Add a bit of humor to lighten the atmosphere of the film. One group decided to show a group of 13 people coming out of a VW to go on a picnic. Nothing was said about how many people there were. Narration only mentioned the area as a recreational spot. But subtle humor was injected into the presentation.

This is also the time to be making titles and credits for the film. We found several imaginative ways to give credits and make titles. Each was based on the theme of the individual movies.

Since our movies all had an environmental focus, we chose to use outdoor backgrounds for the general credits to school and program. For two of the films, we lettered general credits on four pieces of heavy paper, set the papers against leafy backgrounds, and shot five seconds of each film.

For the other two films, we lettered the credits on saran wrap, taped the saran on a window, and focused on the words. Pleasant, hazy views provided the backgrounds. We found that dark colors, such as red, blue, and black, provided the best contrast against a light sky. Trees framed each shot.

Individual titles themselves were even more imaginative. The group working on erosion chose the title, "Silt Kills." They then lettered the title and their names in the dirt and slowly washed them away with a sprinkling can. They did several takes just to be sure that one would be right.

The Pollution Within the Home group chose to make their title from letters cut out of magazine advertisements. The background was a house shingled in a collage of ad scraps.

For credits, each one wrote his name in mustard on an old storm window. We found mustard to be an excellent material for this purpose. Not only did it fit the theme of the film, but it's also a heavy material with a heavy color, it covers well, won't drip, and is available.

We then focused on the words while one of the group tossed trash into a burner in the background. The boy and his action were incidental, but fit the theme.

When filming has been completed, next come editing and splicing. There are two reasons to edit. It is done to remove useless or bad film and to separate sequences which are to be used in the movie being prepared.

Since the script has already been written, you know in which sequence the pictures are to appear. As the individual action sequences are cut, label them by both number and action and hang them in order with masking tape. An editing room in use looks a little like a messy clothesline. As each shot has been identified as useable, check it off on the script. Put the labelled tape on the end of each section of the film. This will make splicing infinitely easier.

Once the film has been cut, labelled and hung in order, and you're sure that there are no blank spots (or have white leader where the blanks appear), it's time to splice.

We found a system which worked best for us. It should work well for you, too. At this point, the entire movie is hanging in order from strips of masking tape attached to the last frame in each sequence. Splicing can now be done in one sitting.

Take the first piece of film and begin to wind it onto a takeup reel on the editor. The emulsion side of the film should be up. At the end of the first piece of film is a piece masking tape identifying it. Remove and discard the tape. Now, take the second piece of film and splice it on to the first. Remember, the emulsion side should be up, and the taped label should be at the end of the strip.

If you've labeled the film properly beforehand, splicing should be easy enough to do in your sleep. But if you didn't, this can be the most difficult and irritating part of the whole project. Repeat to yourself: Label on the end, hang it up, take it down, splice the bottom, pull off tape, ...

If you do have to leave, using this technique will help you to remember what you've already done. The label should always be left on the end of the film. Remove it immediately before adding the next piece.

Be sure to cut all film properly when splicing. You can check for this by pulling the newly spliced film through the editor. If there have been any mistakes, be sure to correct them immediately. A little error can mean a lot of irritation (and torn film!).

When the film is labeled properly, you can't possible make a mistake. But just to be sure, when you come back from a break (or each time you add another piece of film), check the script to be sure you're adding what really comes next.

When you follow all of the guidelines, there's no chance of running film backward or upside down.

The time to catch mistakes is during editing and splicing. Otherwise, it'll be too late. During a water testing sequence, two girls fought for control of the bottle -- both wanted to be in the picture. No one noticed what was happening. Finally, after at least twenty viewings, the director recognized this problem, but by then it was too late -- the film had already been sound tracked.

Next comes the final step - taping sound. You'll need one narrator for this job. Test several voices by taping them and playing them back. Then tape the best voices with background music to test effect. Let the group choose the one they feel best represents them. But be sure that the narrator can read the script and watch the movie at the same time. If he can't, you'll have to choose another. Otherwise, the words and shots won't match.

The narrator should read the script for two or three days prior to taping to become fully familiar with it. Before the first taping, he should make two or three trial runs to match the words to the pictures.

At this point, you may find it necessary to add or cut words and film to carry your message. We found that in order to complete a thought, we had to splice two flashes into the film which we hadn't planned to use.

We also found that one 28 second strip of film had a 30 second narration to accompany it. To fit in the words, the narrator spoke so fast that it was almost impossible to understand her. So we shortened a sentence or two.

You need not fill the entire movie with words - if you do, the thoughts just won't sink in on the viewers. Let some of the shots speak for themselves. Many settings tell their own story.

Privacy is the biggest problem when making a sound track. We found many interferences which we'd never thought of before. Some children were playing outside of the window. The maintenance man chose to mow the lawn that day. A clock struck every half hour. Bells rang. A telephone and P.A. system interfered. The projector itself is noisy.

Once you've identified all possible sound problems and the narrator has practiced his part, only those four actively involved in recording should be in the room. Lock the door and hang a sign on it.

You'll probably want some background music. Let the group choose what they feel best fits the theme of the film. The biggest problem with young people and music is the volume at which they play it. It'll have to be much softer than what they're used to. It may take one bad taping job in which the music drowns out the narration for them to realize this. Remember, too, just as words aren't needed throughout the entire film, music isn't either.

You'll probably make several tapes before finding the best one. If you do, don't ever erase the first one as you tape the second. Save all of them. The first may have been the best after all!

We found that the best technique short of sound tracking the film required the synchronized efforts of all four people working in the sound room. We set the projector at frame No. 1, the guitar player began strumming. At a signal from the tape operator, the projectionist switched on the projector and the tape operator switched on the recorder. The credits and title were attached to the film, of course. The narrator began reading at the correct place. When we played it back, the sound and pictures were in perfect sync.

The best technique for synchronizing film and sound is sound tracking. This is an expensive procedure, so probably will not be used as extensively as taping. To avoid any chance of error in sound tracking, tape first, then transfer the taped sound onto the film.

We ran into one problem when recording. One of the students chose to use a variable speed projector which he set at about the right speed. The team then set about doing an excellent job of recording. The next day they showed their finished product, using a single speed projector and discovered that the other projector has been just a tiny bit too fast. The sound finished a full minute before the film.

Once you've overcome all of the hurdles and obstacles and have a finished product, put your film to use. Show it to school assemblies. Put on a film festival using the films you've produced. Invite local leaders to the festival. Make the films available for community theaters and organizations. The films could convince citizens of the need to act now to correct environmental problems within their community.

APPENDIX I

Small automatic super 8 mm camera

Monopod (this one-legged instrument is easier to handle than a tripod)

Floodlight (for indoor work)

Projector (single speed)

Screen

Editor

Splicer (the kind made for use with tape is the easiest to use)

Film (developed)

Splicing tape

Cleaning fluid

Masking tape

Marking pen

Tape recorder

Tapes

When purchasing equipment, be sure that everything is the same size. You can't edit super 8 film on an ordinary 8 mm editor, for example. It just won't fit!

APPENDIX II

Anyone can make a good film if he remembers to follow these basic steps:

1. Decide on a general concern of interest;
2. Read, listen to experts;
3. Decide on five or six concepts to develop'
4. Assign specific jobs;
5. Write a script to explain the concepts,
6. Decide on the settings to be used;
7. Choose action to illustrate the concepts;
8. Film the action;
9. Rewrite the script;
10. Edit out poor film;
11. Splice and edit good film in the correct sequence;
12. Time the script to the film
13. Revise script and film as necessary;
14. Tape the sound;
15. Put the film to use.